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ABSTRACT

Opinions and recommendations regarding performance evaluations of tenured professors are presented. Some of the arguments in favor of post-tenure evaluation are that it could improve performance, ensure fair treatment, increase motivation, and rid colleges of incompetent faculty. Among the arguments against such a system are that it would defeat the purpose of tenure, threaten academic freedom, increase antagonism between administrators and faculty, and force professors who have already demonstrated competence through the rigorous tenure process to perpetually prove themselves. (DC)

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Personal & Professional

Formal Reviews for Tenured Professors: Useful Spur or Orwellian Mistake?

By SUZANNE PERRY

RACINE, WIS.

In 1973, after seven grueling years of teaching, research, and writing, Professor A was carefully evaluated by her colleagues and awarded tenure. Her continued productivity since then has brought her a full professorship, merit raises, a sabbatical, and the rewards of having her work published in major scholarly journals.

Professor B, on the other hand, received tenure 20 years ago under less demanding circumstances. He was considered competent at the time, but now he is widely thought to be lazy and uninspired. His students often complain about him, and his colleagues whisper about his poor performance.

Not all faculty members, of course, are as successful as Professor A or as unmotivated as Professor B. But the two contrasting images—hypothetical in this instance—are part of a growing controversy in higher education: Should tenured faculty members be subject to periodic reviews of their performance?

Some colleges and universities have answered Yes.

People who endorse formal reviews point to Professor B and say there should be a way to light a fire under such faculty members—that they should not be allowed to sit on their tenure rights forever.

But others, pointing to Professor A, say tenured college professors are already the most evaluated professionals under the sun. Instead of re-evaluating people like Professor B, they say, colleges should use faculty-development programs to help them improve. And for the few professors who are truly incompetent, they add, most institutions already have adequate procedures for discipline and dismissal.

A Sensitive Proposal

Any proposal that hints at tampering with the traditional tenure system is usually a sensitive one in academe, and that was the case at a recent conference on post-tenure evaluation at the Johnson Foundation's Wingspread center here. Joining the foundation as sponsors were the American Council on Education and the American Association of University Professors.

Those favoring systematic post-tenure evaluation said it could improve faculty performance and insure fair treatment for faculty members outside the "old-boy network."

Merle F. Allshouse, president of Bloomfield College, said the review process could "renew and sustain creativity." James M. Rosser, president of California State University at Los Angeles, called it "preventive maintenance." And the president of a state college in the East, who asked not to be quoted by name, said post-tenure evaluations could counteract the "fatigue" that afflicts many faculty members when "nobody is really watching how you're doing your job."

"I think there's a certain stimulus in risk," the state-college president added.

But those opposed to formal reviews of tenured faculty members argued, sometimes heatedly, that the process would defeat tenure's role in protecting academic freedom. It would, some critics said, pressure faculty members to conform, avoid controversial research subjects, or publish "potboilers" to build up their publications records.

The battle lines in the debate were not always drawn strictly between administrators and faculty members.

Tenured faculty members have already undergone a rigorous probation period unlike that of any other profession, said Matthew W. Finkin, chairman of the A.A.U.P.'s Committee A on Academic Freedom and Tenure and professor of law at Southern Methodist University.

Under that process, he said, "the presumption is against the individual—he has to prove himself." To continue that kind of scrutiny after tenure has been awarded seems "Orwellian," he added.

Richard G. Landini, president of Indiana State University, agreed that the drawbacks of a comprehensive evaluation sys-

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Reviews Continued from Preceding Page

tem would be too great. It would lead to "a deterioration of faith" and to "sustained bitterness and mistrust that would manifest itself in a thousand ways," he said.

Bryant Kearl, vice-chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Wisconsin at Madison, said a formal evaluation system would be impractical at his institution. It would produce too much paperwork and antagonism between faculty members and administrators, he said.

"The more formal the evaluation, the more you lose the opportunity to use it in self-improvement," he added.

At the end of the meeting, most participants agreed to a statement that stopped short of endorsing a system of post-tenure evaluation beyond traditional measures. Instead, it supported the many forms of informal evaluation that already occur at colleges and universities for such purposes as providing merit pay, research support, and awards for teaching.

Assessment of Academic Units

"Written descriptions of the purposes, criteria, and methods by which these evaluations are made should be provided to the faculty," the statement said. It added that colleges should regularly assess the teaching, research, and service programs of academic units.

The group that gathered at Wingspread—about 40 faculty members, administrators, and officials of organizations in higher education—could not be said to be highly representative, however. All faculty members were A.A.U.P. officials, and research universities were overrepresented among both faculty members and administrators.

Because of that, some participants complained that the discussion did not address the needs of small or less prominent colleges, where they said resources for faculty-development programs might be limited and professors might not be as motivated to achieve on their own.

Officials of the American Council on Education had called for the meeting here to consider a recommendation last year by the National Commission on Higher Education Issues. The 57-member commission, financed by the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, included college presidents, other educators, and business leaders.

'Appropriate Competence'

In a report on "enhancing academic quality," they declared:

"Campus academic administrators, working closely with appropriate faculty committees, should develop a system of post-tenure evaluation. The process should provide for periodic peer-group reviews to assure that the tenured faculty has maintained the appropriate level of competence and is performing at a satisfactory level."

The commission added that when those procedures identify faculty members of "demonstrated incompetency," administrators and faculty members should act.

"Incompetent faculty members must not be protected at the expense of the students or the maintenance of quality," the panel said.

John B. Bennett, associate director of the A.C.E.'s division of academic affairs and institutional relations, said the council considered post-tenure review important because of increasing public concern about the quality of education.

Several Wingspread participants echoed the notion that colleges and universities are vulnerable to outside pressure because many state legislators, parents, and college trustees believe that tenure is used to protect faculty "deadwood."

"If you stand on your high horse and say [the present system] is a sacrosanct system that can't be attacked, then you are going to be attacked," said the chairman of a state university's board of regents.

Although the A.A.U.P. participants at Wingspread strongly criticized formal post-tenure evaluation, the association has not yet taken an official position on the matter. Its academic-freedom committee plans to raise the issue at an A.A.U.P. meeting in November, said Jordan E. Kurland, associate general secretary.

Both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers (A.F.L.-C.I.O.), while not opposed to performance evaluations for developmental purposes, oppose review systems that can be used to strip faculty members of tenure, officials of those organizations said.

Irwin H. Polishook, professor of

history at Herbert Lehman College and a vice-president of the A.F.T., said such systems created an unacceptable "permanent condition of probation."

Faculty members are particularly sensitive to that issue now because during the past year many colleges and universities have suggested that they might have to lay off tenured faculty members in response to budget problems.

Any process that allows colleges to decide repeatedly whether a faculty member is competent to stay on is a variation of "term tenure," which is an oxymoron, said Walter P. Metzger, a professor of history at Columbia University. If colleges adopt such systems, they will be moving away from the traditional tenure system, which is based on years of accumulated experience, he said.

"You'll have cadres of bureaucratized white-collar workers," Mr. Metzger added. "You won't have the profession as it stands today."

'Positive Tone' Needed

Harold T. Shapiro, president of the University of Michigan, said periodic evaluations of tenured faculty members could be effective if they "take on a demanding but positive tone." But they should be "disconnected" from the question of tenure itself, he said.

The most important task for academe, he said, is not the evaluation of individuals, but "an evaluation of the general teaching and research environment of the university community."

Institutions where some form of post-tenure review is already in place include the 19 campuses of the California State University system. Also, a collective-bargaining agreement between the Association of Pennsylvania State College and University Faculties and 14 institutions outlines a procedure for evaluating tenured faculty members every five years.

G. Terry Madonna, president of the Pennsylvania faculty association, said there had been few problems with the procedure since it was adopted in 1974 because the contract also gives faculty members many protections.

For example, he said, they must be allowed to see all material that goes into their personnel files and be given a chance to respond to it. In addition, those threatened with dismissal can take their case to binding arbitration, he said.

Mr. Madonna said that, to his knowledge, the evaluation system had not yet been used to revoke anyone's tenure.

The American Council on Education plans to follow up on the Wingspread conference by publishing an analysis of the costs and benefits of post-tenure evaluations, Mr. Bennett said. A committee of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities also plans to study the issue.